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Celebrity Worship

Pete Ward

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Introduction

The Introduction presents the main argument of *Celebrity Worship*. Celebrity is discussed as the process whereby people are mediated. Media representation is primarily concerned with people. Celebrity Studies is therefore foundational for the discussion of the relationship between religion and media. The topics for each chapter are briefly discussed.

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Celebrities are all pervasive, one might even say omnipresent. They are the people, that feature in every aspect of media representation. A celebrity is then a person who is mediated. Mediation describes the complex ways in which, through technology, media industries, and social relationships, individuals are actively engaged in processes of, production, representation, and consumption. The explosion in media platforms, and new technologies of communication has had one constant. Whatever the format or device the vast majority of coverage will centre around people. When we consume media, we consume people, and these people are celebrities, or rather they are transformed into celebrities as they participate in processes of production, representation, and consumption. People are meta-morphosed into celebrities by their presence in the media, and by the way that each of us participate in developing relationships with them as a result. The celebrity phenomenon is one of the defining characteristics of our time.

Celebrity has ceased to be the preserve of the famous or of an elite. With the mobile phone, the selfie, and social media, celebrity has been democratised. The mediation of the self means that each of us share in celebrity culture. Daily life is interwoven with media technologies, and identity is something that is performed both on-line and off-line. Through our various feeds and posts, we participate in what might be called the 'celebrification of everyday life'. The 'self' is performed daily on media platforms such as: Instagram, Dating Websites, Facebook, Snapchat or Twitter. Each of us, as a result, has become as attentive to likes, shares, comments, and various emojis, as much as we are of smiles and hellos. Paying attention to how our lives are presented through social media has become a preoccupation that is moderated and adjusted through the pervading sense that we have an audience who are watching us. As they are watching us, we are also watching them. The flow of stories, pictures and posts that we swipe across the phone are welcomed because they are a means to make sense of ourselves and others. All of this taken together means that the mediation of the self and hence celebrity has become a central aspect of all of our lives.

Making Sense of Celebrity Worship: David Attenborough

The idea that celebrity has somehow taken the place of religion has become common place. Celebrities are routinely described as divine, or semi-divine figures, and fans are said to be worshipping their idols. Celebrity is spoken of as a cult. Celebrity Worship, it seems, is a widespread phenomenon, that many see as having its roots in the decline of formal, or traditional, kinds of Religion. In considering the extent to which celebrity might, or might not, be religious in nature, it is useful to focus on a particular individual. David Attenborough is probably not someone who immediately comes to mind when the word celebrity is used. He seems to be a million miles away from the Reality TV Stars, Pop Singers,

YouTube Influencers, and Game Show contestants, that feature in the Celebrity Magazines and on Instagram. Thinking about celebrity worship through someone like David Attenborough is helpful precisely because he is not seen as part of the celebrity world. It is hard to dismiss him as inconsequential, fabricated, or shallow. At the same-time he is deeply influential, and his media output has had an amazing impact on both individuals, and on society as a whole. Nowhere is this more evident than with his remarkable television series Blue Planet II.

In 2017 the BBC nature documentary Blue Planet II was broadcast in the UK, and across Europe. By the end of 2018 the programme had been shown in almost every region of the world, including both the USA and China. Blue Planet II was quite simply a game changer in the global awareness of the catastrophic impact that the use of plastic is having on our natural environment. Episode 7 was entitled, 'Our Blue Planet', and it was a hard-hitting account of the pollution of the oceans, and the harmful effects of microplastics on the fish, mammals, and birds. Viewers were shown the tragic effects of ingesting plastic on all kinds of animals, and in particular the terrible effects that discarded plastic bags were having. The images of dolphins playing with plastic in the sea, and an albatross feeding a plastic bag to her chicks, did more for the environmental cause than any number of scientific reports. The effect that these images had was immediate. Companies, supermarkets, and politicians, began to respond to an upsurge of pressure from the public to change policies around plastic bags, food wrapping, and single use plastic bottles. Imogen Calderwood, writing in the 'Global Citizen', reported that, 88% of those people who had seen the programme had changed their behaviour.¹

It would be impossible to understand the importance of Blue Planet II without taking into account its presenter David Attenborough. It is 'Sir David' that is our guide to the amazing creatures of the sea. His voice takes us to places of wonder, and lays before us things that have never been seen before. Through his presence, close to the animals and the birds, we are also drawn close to them and we actively embrace this experience. The audience is shown the harmful effects of plastics, but we are reassured and convinced, because we have developed a relationship with David Attenborough over the years. His is a voice from our childhood, present on the television since before most of us can remember. The phrase, 'national treasure,' seems to have been made for him. He is someone who has given his life to bringing to us the marvellous beauty of the natural world, and it is because of his authenticity built up over decades on the television, that millions of people were motivated to adjust their lifestyles, and to campaign try to rid the world of harmful plastics. Sir David is however who he is because of the ways in which his audience over decades have chosen to engage with his message. A 'National Treasure' is not simply made by the media but by the nation.

There are many aspects of David Attenborough's work as a broadcaster that might be considered as similar to religion. He is a guide that leads his viewers into knowledge. His

¹ Imogen Calderwood. " "88% of People Who Saw 'Blue Planet II' Have Now Changed Their Lifestyle." *Global Citizen* November 1, 2018. <https://www.globalcitizen.org/en/content/88-blue-planet-2-changed-david-attenborough/>

acceptance as an authoritative figure is similar to that of a minister, or a religious teacher. In his programmes, the natural world is portrayed as something that is not only beautiful, but full of wonder. Humans are located as both a part of this overarching natural environment, but also as a threat to the planet. As a consequence, there is a strong ethical dimension to his nature programming, that emphasises the responsibility of individuals. Despite these parallels, it is a stretch to argue that what is taking place in Blue Planet II is a new kind of religion or a cult. The active participation of his audience in consuming the programmes is deeply significant but it does not constitute a religious community. Nevertheless David Attenborough, and the shows he presents, do serve as a helpful guide to understanding the key dynamics within Celebrity Worship.

Blue Planet II is an example of one of the central elements of celebrity culture, i.e. that the primary content of media is people. Although the programme is about the sea and the creatures that are within it, the package works because of the presenter. David Attenborough is the beating heart of the programme. He is the one who we embrace and welcome as someone who draws us in, and takes us out, to see things we have never seen before. Although the programmes are about the Natural World, it is the person of the presenter that provides the emotional connection to what is being shown. David Attenborough, as the wise teacher, is central to the persuasiveness of this message, but his presence is more important than this. He does not just present a message he invites the audience into the experience of what is being shown. The engagement of the audience and their decision to participate in the show comes from how he functions as a representative of the viewer. Quite simply, because he is there, we are there. Who he is, and how we relate to him, undergo a transformation and this is what is meant by Celebrity Worship. This is a relationship in which the representation of the television programme must be matched by the different ways that audience members chose to share in the experience. There are then two sides to the process of mediation in Celebrity Worship. There is the presence of an individual, such as David Attenborough, in media representation and there are the varied ways in which, through identification and participation, members of the audience chose to make meaning out of what they are viewing. The metamorphosis implied in Celebrity Worship brings about a transformation in the dynamics of relationship that is not unique to Blue Planet II, it is a characteristic of media and the ways in which audiences are actively engaged in generating their own meanings. One of the reasons for this is that whatever media platform we engage with, at root we are taken up with individuals. People form the primary content of every kind of media and the people that we relate to through the media are celebrities.

It's not About Them, It's About Us: Celebrity and the Self

Celebrity Worship is fundamentally about the self. It does not describe a religion, that is concerned with the worship of celebrities as semi-divine beings. No one worships David Attenborough, and yet he represents something that is deeply moving and meaningful. Viewers have a relationship with him, such that when he issues an ethical and environmental challenge, they chose to participate and as a result motivate themselves to act. This relationship is entirely generated by his presence in the media. He is a mediated person. Through the media his presence has been magnified, and millions of people around the world know who he is, and as they actively consume media in some way, he they make him a part of their lives. It is this connection that I want to argue is the first and primary

meaning of the term Celebrity Worship. The meaning of David Attenborough, then is not about who he is, but about who he is to us or rather what we make him into as a part of our lives. Media processes generate an association between audiences and celebrities, that are charged with an energy. This energy does not simply come from the processes of production and representation it is also generated by the different ways in which individuals and groups chose to make sense of themselves in relation to Celebrities. Media Processes are therefore not determinative or uniquely powerful. They gather their charge from the active participation and creativity of individuals as they construct their sense of self in and through the narratives and images that form the primary content of media representation. The religious analogy that is implied in the term Celebrity Worship expresses this energy metaphorically. It is akin to, or like religion.

Celebrity Worship has another significant reference point this is again concerned primarily with the self. David Attenborough is significant, not simply because he is present in the media and famous, he is significant because of what he represents. This meaning is not something that he carries within himself, it is what individuals generate in relation to his media persona. In Celebrity Worship someone like David Attenborough is regarded as a resource for the processing of identity and values among viewers. Worship then is not focussed on who he is, but on who we might, or might not, be. This dialog concerning the self, takes place in relation to media representation it is not simply caused by it. Celebrity should be seen as forming part of a much larger, and widespread shift in society and culture, towards the self, as the primary concern and central project of life. It is this focus on the self that has become the new sacred. Celebrities are important, because they are one of the primary resources used in processing the project of the self.

The people that we encounter through our consumption of media form a resource to process our own sense of who we are. This is most evident in social media where the flow of images and stories that come into our feed generate a social world. This world involves us in a real time, and a continuous process, of observation and comparison. Who we are, and our place in the world, is increasingly understood in relation to this flow of mediated individuals. Posting pictures and stories about ourselves becomes a means to be present in this flow, and through likes and shares, we can gauge the impact of how we construct ourselves in this media space. The significance of social media is not found solely in the characteristics of any social media platform but in the myriad of ways in which people choose to negotiate who they are and who they might wish to be as they actively share in making a sense of themselves by participating in being present to themselves and others through their feeds. Something very similar is taking place through the consumption of every kind of media. Celebrities offer a resource for personal comparison. This might simply be at the level of fashion and lifestyle. It might be around issues of sexuality and the dynamics of personal relationship. Celebrities become the content, for both individual debates about identity, and for more social interaction. Here the social function of gossip is fundamental. Gossip allows the audience to make moral and aesthetic judgements about the people that are featured in the media. Celebrities are the target of gossip precisely because we do not really know them. They are people who we won't directly hurt or injure by expressing our opinions. Celebrity Magazines thrive on stimulating and feeding gossip of this kind, again the key dynamic that is at play has very little to do with who the Celebrity might be, or what they might or might not have done. The real subject is the watching

audience. Celebrity Worship, then, is a means to process the complexities of identity. Celebrity Worship does not describe the admiration of the mass audience for a few people who are in the media. This notion of a cult of enthusiastic followers is a misunderstanding. Celebrity Worship is an active project of the self, where the individual celebrity is simply a means to work on what really counts: the self.

The Self as the New Sacred

The turn towards the self is one of the most significant changes that has taken place in the contemporary religious sensibilities in the West. David Attenborough and Blue Planet II exemplify the shift towards the self in culture. At a very basic level, through his physical presence in front of the camera, the presenter signifies how the world is seen through the self. He represents our presence in the world and our relationship to it. This is the function of television personalities. They take us into events and situations, be it a terrorist attack, a sporting event, or a royal wedding. The camera shows them present, and down in the action, and they take us, as the audience with them. The subtext of these media tropes is that the world is to be read through the individual, and the personal. The self, in the person of the presenter, is placed in the middle of the story not simply for effect. The self becomes the epistemological ground for the story. What is true for a television programme is true for life in general and particularly for religion.

Religion in the developed world has been realigned to become a resource for the project of the self. Fundamental to this change has been the ways in which choice has become a driver in the shaping of religious identity and practice. These changes have been linked in a variety of ways to the effects of media on religion. The internet, for example, is seen as providing access to varied forms of religious knowledge and practice, and this encourages the construction of religious identities that are less monochrome. Religious hybridity is encouraged by the opportunities that are provided by new technology. At the same-time it is clear that religious groups and communities are making use of media technologies to spread their message more effectively. As a result, these groups may experience significant changes. An example of this is the way that Evangelical Christians have used technology to grow new kinds of mega-churches. These changes however are not simply caused by the influence of media rather they come about as individuals and communities actively share and participate in making meaning in and through representation. The relationship between media and religious change has been explored in some detail, and the link to the 'self' as a key driver has been commonplace in theorising these changes. Paradoxically the study of celebrity, has been to date, something that has been marginal to the consideration of the relationship between media and religious change. This is something of an oversight. Rather than being a topic within the study of media and religion, I want to suggest that celebrity is a key element in these changes. There are two reasons for bringing celebrity centre stage in the discussion of media and religion. The first is quite simple. If media is about people and these people are celebrities, then it is just not possible to talk about media, without seeing celebrity culture as central. The second reason is that mediated people are a key driver in the deepest aspect of religious change, and this concerns the turn towards the self. How celebrities facilitate this change and how audiences actively participate in the process of change forms the central topic of this book.

The first two chapters are intended to lay the theoretical groundwork for a consideration of celebrity and religion. Chapter 1 surveys the religion, media and culture conversation. The way in which celebrity culture might contribute to this field of study is presented drawing upon the theoretical frameworks generated in British Cultural Studies. Chapter 2 reviews the way in which Celebrity Worship has been likened to Religion and argues that while this analogy has its limitations the turn towards the self in religion and wider society has generated a new formulation of what is regarded as sacred. Celebrity worship is then linked to these changes. The next three chapters explore the dynamics of celebrity culture. Chapter 3 traces origins of contemporary celebrity culture in previous notions of fame and the background in the economic development of celebrity by the cultural industries. Chapter 4 discusses the way in which celebrity offers a resource for the construction of identity through a series of case studies around lifestyle. Chapter 5 examines the phenomenon of reality television and internet celebrity, and how these facilitate the democratisation of celebrity. The final chapters deal explicitly with religious themes and how celebrity forms a part of the shift towards the self in contemporary religion. Chapter 6 examines how celebrity facilitates a religion of the sacred self through case studies of, Kabbalah, Oprah Winfrey, and the One Love Concert in Manchester. Chapter 7 uses music videos to show how the 'self' is merged with religious themes to generate theologies of the self. Chapter 8 looks at ritual forms of mourning and celebrity death. The final chapter deals with the celebritisation of the Evangelical Church in the United States.